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ABSTRACT

Adolescent literature offers an effective means for curbing sex bias in the public schools, while offering female readers an opportunity to evaluate their life styles, sex roles, and self images. Studies reveal an almost exclusive girls' readership for adolescent novels and until recently the most popular themes were sexual relationships. In contrast to the flat passive characters of the past 30 years, the female protagonist of modern adolescent novels is capable of making decisions; she is a complex person facing real problems. Some current novels deal with the following themes: sexual experience without pregnancy, guilt, or social condemnation; physical and mental illness; unconventional roles for girls; maturing experiences exclusive of boy/girl relationships; and maintaining identity in the context of marriage. "Mia, Alone," by Gunnell Beckman, illustrates the current trend in adolescent novels. It encourages girls to be strong and independent in their choices, and presents a series of alternatives, rather than morals or pat solutions. (HAI)

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Janice Miller Yoder

"Cracking the Glass Slipper" Through Adolescent Literature

The Legal Defense and Education Fund is presently sponsoring a survey for assessing and ending sex bias in public schools. The guide, called Cracking the Glass Slipper, is focusing on the current status of females, particularly in the curriculum structures of the vocational, guidance, and physical education programs. The survey emphasizes the fact that schools must prepare girls for new roles in an ever changing world. "The odds are very high that no matter from what economic station, no matter from what group, no matter from what section of the country, Cinderella-grown-to-womanhood is likely to be divorced, likely to be in a dead-end, low-paying job, and likely to be poor in her old age." (1)

English teachers and reading teachers, in particular, have been alerted to sex stereotyping often found in reading materials selected for common classroom reading. In 1975, the National Council of Teachers of English investigated sexism in English classrooms through the Committee on Classroom Practices. The Committee suggested means for recognizing and eliminating sex role stereotyping in classrooms. It is probably too early to notice any changes in reading choices and attitudes of adolescents as a result of the awareness stressed on the effects of stereotyping. According to research published in the 1970s, sex still appears to be the major determiner of interest patterns in reading for adolescents.

The literature written for adolescents offers a means by which readers can examine life styles, sex roles, and self images. What images of females are being purported through adolescent literature? Has she changed, kept up with the times? What do girls see when they meet themselves in print?

Two researchers have taken a close look at the content of adolescent novels which carry an almost exclusive girls' readership. Rissi (1972) reviewed 15 novels published during the 1950s and 1960s which were classified as

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romances for girls. She found the following similar factors in a majority of the novels. The setting was in a small town, and the story took place during one summer, or if longer, it was within the school year. The protagonists were between 16 and 17 years of age, with upper middle class values. The plot was an ugly-duckling/swan story which depended for a majority of the books on getting an invitation to a party or a dance with a special boyfriend. The boys were all athletes with very minor roles, while the girls were intelligent and interested in poetry and writing. The novels had happy endings with all loose ends tied up at the end of the book.

The second researcher, Stein (1972) reviewed a decade of books with adolescent girls as the protagonist. Stein described early books for girls (those prior to World War II) as having a protagonist who was involved in action rather than introspection. Stein surmised that with the end of World War II, the female withdrew from the career action-oriented life and worried about her status with the opposite sex. During the 1950s, the stories became filled with successful hereoines, passive females, and the beginnings of a search for identity. The 1960s produced books where the heroine tended toward introspection, generally concerned with her individual growth and personality development. The literary device of the first person appears frequently in an attempt to be a participant in the story, and at the same time to be an objective narrator who reports the facts as they are. Stein suggested that the taboos and stereotyped images of the female as portrayed in earlier literature have changed in the contemporary portrayal of the female. Today's heroine is bright and capable of decision-making and actions.

One of the basic tasks or interests the adolescent experiences during the maturation process is that of achieving an easy relationship with members of the

opposite sex. This interest can be found in many adolescent novels as a typical thematic concern, particularly as it is developed through the dating relationship. Three novels, written from different perspectives in time--1940, 1955 and 1970--reflect the changing sexual mores and values which help to influence and shape each girl's values. The three books, Seventeenth Summer (Daly, 1948), The Cheerleader (MacDougall, 1973) and A Long Way Home from Troy (Mills, 1971), have basically the same central character and plot--a teenage girl falling in love for the first time and establishing a relationship which is influenced and ultimately changed as the person becomes aware of her own value system.

Obviously the dating patterns have changed during the 30-year time span. In Seventeenth Summer Jack stops at Angie's house; she is terribly embarrassed because she is barefooted. He first inquires whether she is going with someone, and he must meet Angie's family formally on their first date. In relating her experience, Angie tells the reader on the first page that her experience was not "puppy love or infatuation or love at first sight," but something she had never known, couldn't explain, and would never forget. Angie considers "love" and the feelings that accompany it to be only for adults, and she was not an adult. She does not have to deal with her own feelings because she does not realize that the possibility exists.

Snowy, in The Cheerleader, based in the 1950s, accepts love on a physical basis. She and her gang confidently relate each intricate step of their experiences. They have catalogued each movement and labelled it right or wrong morally according to the motive. The girls are willing to accept loving, but they never discuss love.

Jeannie, in A Long Way Home From Troy illustrates the "sex-educated" contemporary girl as she tries to assess her feelings about sex. She says:

> I mean, I think sex is a completely natural and wholesome God-given human function. I just wonder why God couldn't have waited to give this particular function a bit later in the human cycle, instead of throwing it in during adolescence before you're old enough to be married, old enough to be finished with your education, and in most states, before you're old enough to drive. (71)

After they had dated for several weeks, Truck wants to make love to Jeannie and asks her. He says that he'll be careful.

> It would have been so simple if pregnancy was the only thing to be afraid of. But there was much more, a whole tangle of other things like guilt and self-respect and reputation, and that old nagging fear of being taken for a big ride and then put down in the end. Stupid hangups, maybe--built up by all those years of lectures and movies and warnings--but very real. And not so easy to shrug off. And even harder to put into words. (125)

Jeannie finally relents, struggling with the fear of pregnancy--and her guilt. "What Truck and I had done seemed to have been more foolish and careless than immoral, really. I wanted his loving but I didn't want his love: that was immoral."

Jeannie is much more aware of the many facets of a relationship than the other two girls are. She knows the facts involved and she understands that love is much more than a physical relationship. She realizes that attitude, conscience, responsibility, and self-respect are also a part of involvement.

The portrayal of female adolescent sexual behavior in fiction has changed in adolescent literature in the last ten years. "Writers have progressed from acceptance of female sexuality, through acknowledgment of the problems and possible solutions to unwanted pregnancy, to a new plateau: portraying protagonists who defy conventional sexual behavior and do not suffer socially as a result." (Belden, 1978) Two books written in the last two years, Forever by Blume (1976) and It's OK If You Don't Love Me by Klein (1977) present protagonists who can openly experiment with sex--with the approval or at least

acknowledgment of their parents. Premarital sex is viewed as a part of the maturation process.

Forever describes a love affair between two adolescents who discover that their relationship will not last forever. Their affair involves a satisfying sex experience without pregnancy, guilt or social condemnation.

Norma Klein's novel has a socially uninhibited protagonist who is a high school student in New York City. Jody comes from a broken home, upper middle class, with very liberal values. One assumption under consideration in the novel is that good sexual relationships can be established without the restrictions and responsibilities of love. Again, there are no pregnancies or condemnations, but rather an exploration of the meaning and implications of sexual relationships.

A review of recently published novels with female protagonists indicates that the image of the female has changed from the fairly attractive, moderately popular girl of the 1950s and 1960s to that of a complex young person facing real problems. For example, in Gertrude Samuels' ALA Best Books for Young Adults--1974, Run Shelley, Run!, Shelley has a history of running; running from foster homes, running from her step father, and running from the law. Shelley appears again briefly in Samuels' 1977 novel, Adam's Daughter, as a well-adjusted, matured, parolee who has been accepted by a college. In Adam's Daughter, Robyn, 17, meets her father as he is leaving prison, and defying her mother's and friend's advice, she sets out to help her father adjust to life outside the wall. When she moves into an apartment with him in order to give him some state of stability, she is forced to grow up rapidly as she becomes entangled in the violent and often heartless world created by the adults around her. By doing what she believes to be right, she achieves a height of self

realization that could serve as a model for readers.

The portrayal of the protagonist in an active role rather than a passive one is an acknowledgment that adolescent females are experiencing traumatic physical and mental illness (The Summer Before, Windsor; Sunshine, Klein), values exploration (Trying Hard to Hear You, Scoppetone; Diving for Roses, Windsor; Listen for the Fig Tree, Mathis), and sexual crisis (Are You in the House Alone? Peck; and Why Me?, Dizenzo). One of the observed trends in a majority of selections in the 1975 BYA Book Poll was the image of a stronger and more independent female protagonist. Many of the young women depicted in the novels that year reached a higher level of maturity without necessarily experiencing the typical boy-girl relationship so often found in the rites of passage stories when females are the protagonists. A majority of the books depicting adolescent experiences that year included female protagonists. They included: Transport 7-41-R, Degens; Of Love and Death and Other Journeys, Holland; Is That You, Miss Blue?, Kerr; Representing Superdoll, Peck; Trying Hard to Hear You, Scoppetone.

Female protagonists are also starting to take on some unconventional female roles. Three authors need to be mentioned in particular: Arundel, Coleman, and Beckman.

Honor Arundel's two books, The Terrible Temptation (1971) and The Blanket Word (1973) provide a framework for the examination of an adolescent completing the transition stage of adolescence into the incorporation stage of adulthood. Jan Meredith, 18, leaves for college with a determined idea of who she is and what she will become.

> All my childhood it seemed that I had been longing for some exquisite moment when I would be grown-up and free of obligations.

> All that the other girls wanted was to get married, preferably to some executive with a powerful motor car, have children, coffee mornings, sherry parties, and pine-paneled kitchens.
>
> Well, now I was grown up and marriage and motherhood were still at the bottom of my list. (21)

Through her mother's death, she receives the complete independency she has craved. She refuses part of her inheritance, sulks, and returns to the university. At the end of the second book, The Blanket Word, Jan comes to know the meaning of responsibility and happiness, making serious decisions about living without a man as an emotional crutch.

The image of a young woman struggling to maintain her identity following marriage is treated in Hila Coleman's novel, After the Wedding. Katie Holbrook, an 18-year-old art student from New York marries Peter, who is in the broadcasting business. Attracted to one another because of their values, they try to maintain their personal integrity through their lifestyles. However, Katie's simple lifestyle is thwarted by Peter's insatiable desire to succeed in the business world. She is shattered by the experience, especially since her mother had taught her that a wife's place was with her husband.

> I don't know how long I sat there, minutes, hours . . . . And then a strange thing happened. I felt a great relief as if someone had tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Hey, kid, you're free. You don't owe anybody anything." (87)

After the Wedding assures girls they need not be dependent on a male for a livelihood or for self-realization.

Gunnel Beckman, a Swedish writer, has written two outstanding books which encourage girls to be strong, independent, and to acknowledge the choices available to them. Mia Alone is a book which gives no pat solutions or patterns to follow, but it does offer an indepth insight into alternatives, decision making, and growing maturity. While waiting for the results of her pregnancy

test, Mia re-examines her values and priorities--her mother's unfulfilled life through marriage, her boyfriend's assumption that after they marry she will stay at home with the children, and her own feelings and vocational goals which complicate any easy answers. The 1977 book, That Early Spring, is a sequel to Mia Alone and examines Mia's life after she knows that she is not pregnant. The novel exposes several concerns and conflicts experienced by Mia as she seeks her own identity. 1) Although Mia does not want to give up her career for marriage (she is in technology, a new area for girls), it is difficult for her to accept the fact that her mother is leaving because she needs a new start in life. 2) She discusses the archaic method of being selected by a boy--and on the basis of that selection, falling in love.

> And how did one fall in love? It seemed such a matter of chance. Was it just that when a more or less acceptable guy got it into his head to fall for you, then you took it for granted you'd fall in love with him? You'd be pleased that someone had chosen you. Flattered, quite simply. So you'd fall in love with him, bong!! Especially if he danced well and had kind brown eyes. (9)

3) The need for sex education is developed in the book: Mia's aunt relates:

> To tell you the truth, I almost begin to long for the good old days when it was in to be moral. No, no, Mia dear, I know, you needn't protest, but all the same, it's time people saw that all this sexual freedom entails responsibility. Instead you can't even open a magazine without reading about sixteen year olds complaining about not getting the right sort of orgasm! And I read somewhere else that abortions for thirteen year olds had trebled in the last year. That's really mad! Yes I've nothing against free abortion, but what's needed now is quite different information from what young people get today . . . .
>
> There should be easily accessible advice bureaus where boys and girls could go and get sensible advice. Not just on contraceptives . . . but something on responsibility, and how shall I put it, morals, morality, and sex . . . and what's going to happen to all those unwanted children? (12)

4) Even though Mia decided she is not ready for marriage and a family, she continues to acknowledge her desire to be a homemaker. Hearing that her

friend is going to have a baby, she has--"That eternal old dollhouse instinct--get married-and-have-children-longing." 5) Although Mia advocates open and free relationships, she finds that she has difficulty dealing with a friend she meets who will not make promises or commitments. She fights the feeling of being used and of being vulnerable because of the arrangement. 6) Many issues concerning sex roles are discussed. Mia's grandmother tells of her own struggles and roots in the women's movement. Mia discovers that her great-grandmother had planned a career only to find it impossible to continue after she had a family. It is interesting to note the grandmother's view of her own situation:

> I didn't feel in the least oppressed by my husband, and so I stopped worrying about my oppressed sisters. I was happy and content, we shared our few pennies between us, we had children and worked hard--it was enough for me. It was a long time afterward, really not until in my old age, that I woke up to the fact that we women have a mutual responsibility for each other, regardless of our own situation. (41)

How do girls perceive themselves in adolescent literature? Belden (1978), who did a comparison of the female image in books published from 1974-1977, found that female protagonists are treated seriously in adolescent novels, and that in some cases, they were taking on assertive roles.

1. Adolescent protagonists are most frequently found with serious problems, but not hopeless ones, sometimes taking a passive stance, but frequently receiving aid from someone else or occasionally becoming more assertive themselves.

2. Although many protagonists have negative attitudes toward themselves, some do come to know themselves and feel self-sufficient.

3. Female protagonists continue to come from a wide variety of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

4. They have increasing sexual sophistication, but are re-affirming traditional concepts of emotional involvement as a vital part of sexual relationships.

5. Some adolescents are exploring roles traditionally assigned to males, but the majority follow conventional female roles.

There are samples of novels published during the 1970's which reflect the current trend of feministic concerns. Descriptions of dating patterns, sexual behavior, decision making, and sex roles offer alternatives to the stereotypic Cinderella-Prince model. There does appear to be a conscious effort on the part of some novelists to expose assertive, bright female protagonists who are capable of taking active roles in the events around them.

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